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Way down to the water

Lake Michigan boaters, marina operators adjust to 35-year low

By **Dan Moran**
STAFF WRITER

WAUKEGAN — If you hang around a Great Lake long enough, you see the extremes and everything in between. Mary Walker, harbor master at Waukegan Harbor, can easily recall what Lake Michigan had to offer 15 years ago.

"In 1986, the water was so high it was literally over the top of the docks on some days," said Walker, a 17-year veteran at Waukegan Harbor. "It was right up to the edge of the docks, and with certain wind conditions it would splash over. That lasted about a month or so, and actually the (Army) Corps of Engineers estimated that it might go even higher than that."

But the water did go down. And it has gone down so much in the past two years that Walker said, "Now we're seeing the bottom of the scale," with water levels so far below Waukegan Harbor's fixed docks that boaters have to use ladders just to board their craft.

35-year low

Four years of mild winters, lower precipitation, lower runoff and increased evaporation have conspired to send Lake Michigan's levels down to a 35-year low, according to the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Mich.

As of March, the level of Lake Michigan was just 8.7 inches above the record low in 1964. The reading in April was within 9 inches of the record low for that month, also from 1964, according to the Army Corps of Engineers.

New navigation hazards

According to Virginia Wood, general manager at North Point Marina in Winthrop Harbor, the recreational boater needs to "be aware that the coastline is different than it has been in years past. For one thing, the beaches extend farther out now."

Walker agreed, saying she notices that sailboat captains are waiting longer to set sail as they troll out of the harbor.

"They go east to a deeper area of the lake to put their sails up. I think they know that boating along the shoreline is riskier right now," Walker said. "People who are boaters know they should always pay attention to the aids to navigation, but there may be other (natural and man-made obstacles) that have been under for so long nobody knows that they're out there."

An accident last weekend off Racine demonstrated this scenario in fatal detail. A boater drowned and his companion had to be pulled from the water after their 14-foot runabout hung up on a shoal and then capsized as the man tried to free it.

Sgt. William Halliday of the Racine County Sheriff's Department boat patrol said the low water has exposed some parts of the lake bottom that previously were not a problem

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for most pleasure craft.

More shallow than charted

"These types of things that they struck have always been there. They just are coming into play more," Halliday said. "The shoal areas are on all the lake charts, so people just have to be a little more educated when they go out on the lake. Local knowledge of the lake is the best you can have."

Still, even the charts can be deceiving, said Chief Warrant Officer P.J. Jones of the Coast Guard in Milwaukee. He said boaters need to realize that the water level now can be lower than what's noted as the average on the charts.

At the Coast Guard station in Sturgeon Bay, Wis., Petty Officer Doug Moore said some shoals are no longer underwater hazards.

"They're about one foot above the water," he said. "They stuck out a little bit last year, but now they are really protruding. We haven't seen that for at least 15 years."

At North Point, a 1,500-slip facility that ranks as the largest marina on the Great Lakes, Wood said boaters are being made aware that the low lake levels might prove hazardous for sailboats with a deeper draft.

"Within our harbor, we're OK right now," Wood said. "We own our own dredger, so we've been keeping up with things the best we can. We're trying to keep everything at least 8 feet deep in the harbor, so we're telling captains of deep-draft sailboats — the ones where their keels go down at least 7 feet — to be careful in areas where we need to dredge."

One advantage North Point has during the low-water days is its floating docks, installed in 1989 with an eye on adjusting to the vagaries of nature. Wood said occupancy at the marina is in the 93 percent range and hasn't been affected by the low lake levels, which became evident last summer.

At Waukegan Harbor, where the docks are at a fixed height, Walker said officials have worked with two different engineers over the past two years to explore options for adjusting to changing lake levels.

"The problem with any modification you do is it ends up costing almost as much as putting in an entirely new marina," Walker said.

While long-term options like adjustable docks are explored, Waukegan Harbor denizens can make use of longer safety ladders that stretch beyond the fixed-length versions that end well short of a safe step to watercraft.

"From what we would call mid-average, (the water) is down about 3 feet," Walker said. "That's about 6 feet down from the high mark when you needed a ladder to get up in your boat."

"But you know what some of the old guys say: 'Seven years up, seven years down,' " Walker said. "We've been down for a while, so maybe we'll be on the way back up again soon. But it's a big guessing game."

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